

The Moroccan government's promised campaign to expand press freedom languished in 2014, as draft legislation fell short of recommendations from media freedom groups and failed to progress through the legislature. Unofficial but clear restrictions remained in place, discouraging coverage of politically and socially sensitive subjects, while restrictive laws continued to be used to clamp down on journalists and news sources.

Legal Environment

Morocco's 2011 constitution guarantees freedom of the press, but its vague language enables great latitude for interpretation and hinders enforcement of media protections. The press law prohibits criticism of the monarchy and Islam and effectively bars independent coverage of certain taboo subjects, including the royal family and the status of Western Sahara. Defamation is a criminal offense punishable by up to one year in prison and/or fines of up to approximately \$12,000. In the most recent high-profile defamation case, Youssef Jajili, editor in chief of the weekly *Alaan*, was arrested in January 2013 and charged with criminal defamation for an article in which he reported that a government minister had used public money to order alcohol while on a taxpayer-funded trip, a charge embarrassing to the official given the Islamic prohibition on consumption of alcohol. Jajili was fined 50,000 dirhams (\$6,000) and given a two-month suspended sentence in June 2013.

Journalists are often imprisoned on trumped-up criminal charges, as opposed to explicitly press-related offenses. In June 2014, Moroccan authorities arrested journalist Mahmoud Lhaisan following his televised report on police abuse during protests after a World Cup game. Lhaisan is a reporter for Rasd TV, which is connected with the Sahrawi separatist group Polisario Front. He was charged with illegal protest, obstructing traffic, and attacking police officers. Critics suggested that his arrest was politically motivated.

Ali Anouzla, editor of the Arabic edition of the news website *Lakome*, was arrested in September 2013 for posting an article that included a link to a YouTube video in which an extremist group criticized Morocco's King Mohamed VI and called for Moroccan youth to wage jihad; he was freed on bail in October. After a number of delays in the case, in May 2014 Anouzla received a one-month suspended sentence and a fine of 5,000 dirhams (\$600). Anouzla's supporters argued that the charges were a pretext to target the editor, whose coverage has been critical of the king in the past and who had earlier in the year broken a politically damaging story about the king accidentally pardoning a child molester.

Blogger and journalist Mustafa al-Hasnawi, a known advocate for the rights of incarcerated members of the Islamic movement, was arrested in May 2013; in July, he was sentenced to a four-year jail term on terrorism charges, although the sentence was reduced on appeal to three years in October. The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) condemned his incarceration, asserting that he had been punished for defending human rights and criticizing the government. He remained in prison throughout 2014.

In October, the Ministry of Communication announced three bills—on press and publishing, the status of professional journalists, and the National Press Council—belatedly launching a reform process promised after the 2011 constitutional referendum. Although the bills mark progress toward strengthening press freedom and access to information in Morocco, many of their provisions fall short of international standards. Press freedom organizations urged the government to consult with media and civil society in order to introduce provisions explicitly guaranteeing access to online information, to eliminate severe

penalties for defaming public figures and institutions, and to omit penalties for publishing articles that question Morocco's territorial integrity, among other reforms. These bills had not been adopted by the parliament by the end of 2014.

On July 31, the cabinet adopted a draft law on access to information. The draft was criticized by watchdog groups such as Transparency International and Article 19 for containing language that would restrict, rather than expand, the public's access to information. In addition, a clause that would have mandated the creation of a national commission responsible for information access, included in an earlier version, was deleted. The bill had not passed at year's end.

The government appoints the president and four of eight board members of the High Authority for Audio-Visual Communication, which issues broadcast licenses and monitors content to ensure compliance with licensing requirements. The prime minister appoints two additional board members, and the presidents of the two chambers of Parliament each appoint one of the remaining members. Publications must also obtain accreditation in order to operate, and can be suspended or censored if their content is deemed a threat to public order.

Political Environment

King Mohamed VI and his government continued to wield considerable control over the editorial content of domestic broadcast media in 2014. The government holds the authority to appoint the heads of all public radio and television stations.

Authorities have sporadically blocked certain websites and online tools, including news sites, Google Earth, and blogging platforms. The state also occasionally cracks down on those who produce critical online content on issues such as the monarchy, religion, or official corruption. Sites that have been blocked at times in recent years included Instagram, Pinterest, and the news site *Lakome*, as well as the voice over IP applications Skype and Viber.

Self-censorship is widespread, and journalists tend to stay within unofficial red lines to avoid heavy fines, prison sentences, or extralegal intimidation and physical violence in retribution for their stories. Some journalists continue to push the boundaries of permissible coverage and report on sensitive subjects such as the military, national security, religion, and sexuality, but most have moved outside Morocco to escape government harassment and surveillance.

Foreign publications are widely available in Morocco, but the foreign media are not immune from government repression. Authorities rescinded accreditation for all journalists working in Morocco for Qatar's Al-Jazeera satellite television network in 2010, effectively suspending the network's reporting from the country. The bureau remained closed until April 2013, when it reopened following negotiations with the government. Foreign publications are also occasionally banned or censored. The Spanish daily *El País* was banned twice in 2012, first for publishing a cartoon of the king and later for coverage of a book that was critical of the monarch. No additional foreign publications were banned in 2014.

Physical attacks on journalists are less common than legal actions, though harassment and intimidation do occur. In August 2012, Ali Lmrabet, who runs the online news portal *Demainonline*, was beaten and robbed by unidentified men who he claimed were plainclothes policemen who had previously harassed him. In 2005, Lmrabet was banned from practicing print journalism in Morocco for 10 years for his reporting on the Sahrawi people, and has been subjected to repeated harassment by the government. In 2013, Agence France-Presse journalist Omar Brouksy was targeted by the police for publishing an article

that implied that the king was not politically neutral. Although cases of physical aggression were not widespread in 2014, a national guardsman reportedly attacked two TV journalists in June.

According to the constitution, the press in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara is free, but this is not the case in practice. There is little in the way of independent Sahrawi media. Moroccan authorities are sensitive to any reporting that is not in line with the state's official position on the territory's status, and they continue to expel, detain, or harass Sahrawi, Moroccan, and foreign reporters who write critically on the issue. Alternative viewpoints and resources such as online media or independent broadcasts from abroad are not easily accessible to the population.

Economic Environment

There are nearly 20 daily and more than 80 weekly publications in circulation in Morocco, and it is estimated that more than 70 percent of these are privately owned. Broadcast media are still dominated by the state, and FM radio stations are largely prohibited from airing programs of a political nature. However, residents can access critical reports through pan-Arab and other satellite television channels. The regime uses advertising and subsidies, as well as aggressive financial harassment, to repress critical media coverage and intimidate the independent press.

Although the internet is used as a platform for journalism and the dissemination of news, the government exerts control over online media through the press law as well as censoring content. The high rate of illiteracy in parts of the country limits its reach as a news source; however, internet use, particularly social media use, continues to grow at a fast rate. Approximately 57 percent of the population regularly accessed the internet in 2015.